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Henning Melber

Editorial

African Studies: why, what for and by whom?*

A debate on what is supposedly understood as African Studies has so far been dominated by US-American and of lately also Afro-centric orientations. The perspectives tend to be affected if not shaped by the individual positioning of the respective authors. In as much as the personal socialisation plays a role, views are also strongly influenced by different professional background, academic discipline and the schools of thought considered of relevance. There is an obvious historical, geographical, cultural and class dimension to the matter (cf. Andreasson 2005). African Studies emerged mainly due to a colonial legacy or direct involvement of states in either the colonisation or decolonisation of African regions or people – with the latter as the passive objects rather than the architects of the study areas defined. On the other hand there are strong geopolitical and strategic dimensions, which have motivated to some extent the focus on area studies (including Africa) in the USA after World War II. Hence one of the questions one might be confronted with is that of the social and political interest: what motivates not only scholars to embark on African Studies, but allows for employment and support by state institutions in this particular academic area. Is there a more or less direct agenda attached to the support of African Studies? And if so, which agenda is this and to what extent do we agree or differ on the underlying motives? – Last but not least: how do we contribute to such an agenda and its implications and execution by what we are doing and how we are doing it (as institutions and as individual researchers)?

* This introduction is based in parts on an essay (cf. Melber 2005), which takes the matter(s) further into a German debate on the relevance and priorities in African Studies, as provoked through earlier contributions to this journal (cf. <www.duei.de/iak/de/content/publikationen/forschungsdebatte.html>). I am grateful to Urte Schneider for all the practical support while guest editing this issue and would like to acknowledge the fruitful cooperation and exchange with Dirk Kohnert, who contributed his time and energy to make this special theme come true. I finally wish to thank my colleagues at The Nordic Africa Institute for the inspiring debates in particular during our research unit retreat in 2004 on topical issues related to this theme.

The challenge already starts with the efforts to define the subject and reach a common understanding. According to a survey quoted by Alpers/Roberts (2002: 13; see also Kassimir 1997: 161), 'mainstream Africanists across the spectrum of U.S. higher education appear to be divided with respect to what constitutes 'African Studies' '. The differing choices include 'study of sub-Saharan Africa' (22%), 'study of the entire continent of Africa' (33%) and 'study of the people of Africa, both in Africa and the diaspora' (41%). The authors suggest that African Studies 'should also include ... the place of Africa in its global context, both historically and contemporaneously'. But they themselves seem to unnecessarily narrow this wide concept again when summarising that African Studies 'is about peoples, both on the continent of Africa and abroad, rather than about a continent called *Africa*'. African Studies should be even more, though peoples both in and outside Africa are certainly a most relevant point of departure: it should include foreign interests, policies and influences, as well as perceptions outside of Africa on Africa (whatever the definition of 'Africa' then is). To that extent, 'Africa' is also understood as a mirror image of international relations¹, images, projections and their results, and one could agree with the insight the authors offer under footnote 1: 'it is certain that each and every Africanist would write a very different paper' (Alpers/Roberts 2002).

Martin and West (1995: 24) start with a threatening but also misleading provocation by stating the 'spectre of irrelevance' is hanging over 'African Studies'. What they possibly want to alert us to is that the future of African Studies rests on shaky grounds in countries like the USA (but also the UK or Germany, for that matter), since those in social (political and economic) power have no direct interest in the matters analysed. But that does of course not mean that African Studies are irrelevant, neither within nor outside academic discourses – even though if that might well have been the perception of those having to some extent the power of definition – at least in material terms. African Studies as area studies were in the United States during the 1990s suffering from a 'benign neglect' through US-American (foreign) policy makers and under massive attack by an inter-play of several factors. These included after the Cold War period the declared 'end of history' through the increasingly globally effective neo-liberal discourse as much as the corresponding hegemonic role of late capitalism paradigms also in academia. In the meantime, some believe to witness a recovery, which seems to justify the diagnosis that 'area studies are alive and well' (Wey-

1 The dominant ignorance concerning African issues in International Relations theory is in itself a noteworthy phenomenon and a striking example of the extent to which the continent is marginalized in parts of the mainstream academia (cf. Jones 2005).

land 2004: 19), not least because of more reconciliatory tones from the camp of rational choice protagonists, who declared their intention 'to return to the rich, qualitative, and descriptive materials that narratives offer'.²

More than the generosity of other schools of thought, however, there are other relevant interests not guided by a pure desire for academic excellence. They relate to the emerging new scramble for control over African resources, in particular oil, on the one hand. On the other hand, they are related to the security discourse, which after 11th September 2001 in the US-declared global war against terror contributed to a revitalisation of African Studies as strategic area studies. These motives for new analyses are beyond doubt a double-edged sword as such defined interest reduces the continent again to an object of super power rivalry.³ It is therefore essential to join (Kassimir (1997:156), who argues for the relevance of African Studies beyond the 'utilitarianism' of economic, geopolitical and strategic interests: 'Local knowledge and global knowledge are inseparable and mutually constitutive'. One might even go a step further and – for the sake of the argument – maintain that local knowledge is at the same time global knowledge. As Kassimir (ibid.) concludes: 'both global knowledge and local knowledge are necessary for contemporary scholarship; only together are they sufficient'. Along similar lines Mbembe (2001: 9) stresses that African societies (like all other societies) can be located 'between generality and singularity', with a 'peculiar 'historicity' ... rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized.' - The question remains to be answered, still: who creates which type of knowledge and for what purpose?

Other strong arguments for a legitimate and necessary place of African Studies in the accumulation of knowledge offers Berger (1997: 5): 'in order for such issue-oriented discussions to transcend parochial Western theories and data, participants with in-depth area-based knowledge will be as essential as ever to true global and comparative dialogue'. She also has the courage to tackle and deconstruct the highly sensitive inner-African discussions over what de-

2 Robert Bates/Avner Greif/Margaret Levi/Jean-Laurent Rosenthal/Barry Weingast, 'Introduction.' In: *Analytical Narratives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 12 (quoted in Weyland 2004: 19, footnote 5).

3 The worrying trend has been forcefully brought forward and alerted to in the admirably courageous political (and certainly controversial) speech by the ASA president at the 2004 conference in New Orleans (Barnes 2004). A recent documentation provided further evidence to strengthen her analysis; cf. 'Africa: Whose Energy Future?' *AfricaFocus Bulletin*, 3 October 2005.

serves to receive the blessing as 'African Studies' in a politically correct Afro-centric view by pointing out:

'Orientalist' criticisms inevitably lump together a rich and diverse tradition encompassing writings from many perspectives ... written by scholars from all over Africa, Europe and North America as well as other parts of the world. By treating some of these areas of interest as critiques of a pristine, homogeneous 'African studies' rather than integral parts of a diverse and continually changing field, some critics have manufactured a mythical construct that they have then proceeded to dismantle. Furthermore, alleging that there is an 'African' interest that scholars have neglected also assumes an essentialist uniformity of perspective among Africans, rather than acknowledging that complex individual and collective identities based on gender, nationality, language, ideology and scholarly orientation mitigate against any single specifically 'African' perspective on African studies.

(Berger 1997: 9)

As relevant as the identified substantive elements are, she unfortunately misses out to add the fundamental dimension of social class and corresponding interests to the list.

Berger (1997: 11) also maintains that 'more important than the topics of African studies research during the coming years ... will be the revitalization of academic life and academic freedom in Africa'. It is particularly interesting to take note of the related concerns and views articulated by Mkandawire (2002) and Sall (2002), but also Lonsdale in this issue. At the same time, a raging controversy among the African scholars highlighted in recent years the marked differences over what should be considered as 'legitimate African Studies'. As one of the protagonists points out: 'legitimate criticism of the damaging effects of occidental Africanism has been transformed into an extreme fetishizing of geographical identities' (Mbembe 1999). He identifies the following main obstacles to rigorous academic debate within the inter-disciplinary field of African Studies: nativism ('as if black Africa were all of Africa and all Africans were negroes'), a territorialization of the production of knowledge ('the false belief that only autochthonous people who are physically living in Africa can produce, within a closed circle limited to themselves alone, a legitimate scientific discourse on the realities of the Continent') and a 'lazy interpretation of globalisation' (Mbembe 1999; see also Mbembe 2000). Turning globalisation into a potential asset for African Studies, he advocates an approach, which could serve as a complementing guiding principle for the implementation of the mandate of our own institution: 'networks must be given priority over structures. Competition should be encouraged and the circulation of intelligence should become the rule. And,

while continuing to invest in capacity-building, we must establish dialogues with both the various African diasporas and with other worlds.' (Mbembe 1999)⁴

In contrast to those who emphasise the differences, African as area and International Studies should be respected as relevant in the bigger and more complex picture of a puzzle. The perspectives are in their variety not mutually exclusive but require and benefit from each other. To discuss in serious terms the danger of domination of African Studies by Western scholars requires firstly a strict definition of both (and will already indicate the problem to operationalise the terms in practical ways). Any premature generalisation confirms the structural side of the (indeed existing) substance of the matter. At the same time, however, it runs the risk of brushing aside the existing individual choices and options of collaboration and interaction. As the 'Mbembe-Zeleza' controversy (if not feud)⁵ documents (cf. Robins 2004), there is also the danger of a similarly ignorant counter-position, which ultimately results in claiming genuine control over knowledge on the basis of particular dimensions rooted in claims of origin and subsequent entitlement. While aspects of socialisation and individual experiences (with the emphasis on individual) complement collective identities at all times and result in the uniqueness of the human experience in each and every person, we should be careful to use the argument of being 'the same' or 'the other' for academic controversies as a mono-causal reasoning.⁶

African Studies and the disciplines should be considered from a point of view of assumed strength concerning the value of truly inter-disciplinary oriented methods and schools of thought. It demands a dialectical understanding of scholarly work: African Studies benefit from the strength of the various disciplines applied and in return strengthen the various disciplines beyond the immediate space of what is considered to be 'African Studies'. Interesting in this constellation is the positioning of oneself and of others as

4 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza responded to Mbembe's view with a sharp critique ('Of Ghettos and Academic Pimps') as documented in Zeleza (2003: 391-395).

5 See in particular chapter 5 ('The 'Posts,' History, and African Studies') of Zeleza (2003: 229-293), who among others has Archie Mafeje (1994) and Issa Shivji (2002) as prominent supporter of his concerns over African intellectuals suspected to be 'mere reproductive forces in the process of globalisation' (Praeg 2005). Or in Zeleza's words 'factors of the contemporary global system, with its insatiable appetites and capacities to absorb and commodify discursive oppositions and cultural difference' (Zeleza 2003: 44; see already chapters 21 and 22 in Zeleza 1997: 478-510). Zeleza's scathing personal attacks on Mbembe (see esp. Zeleza 2003: 282) are insulting to an extent that suggests that there is more (or actually less) than a mere academic discourse at stake, which also relates to the role(s) of the antagonists in CODESRIA.

6 See for an overview on recent approaches to position one self and the moral bases of political action in a variety of scholarly disciplines, perspectives and subjects the review article by Klaitz (2005).

scholars, activists, and intellectuals. To what extent allows 'global Africa' to establish common denominators irrespective of origins and identities of the actors involved in the processes (politically, analytically)? Is there a common ground to act, which is able to eliminate (or at least put aside) potentially divisive aspects of one's personal making (in terms of socialisation impacts through shaping the individual perspectives by means of gender, social class and cultural roots, to mention just a few most significant factors)? Who plays which role in 'Africanizing Knowledge' (Falola/Jennings 2002), and to what extent is this at the same time again an expression of 'global Africa' – simply because Africa can only be global under the factual circumstances created and confronting us all as human beings at the beginning of this 21st century? Could it be that the challenges 'global Africa' is confronted with are the challenges all human beings the world over are tasked to meet?

The contributions to this issue approach the spectre of African Studies mainly from European perspectives in the sense that the authors offer views, which are predominantly rooted or at least accommodated in academic institutions in France, Germany and the UK, but also the USA and South Africa. Few of them are African scholars, while most are scholars in African Studies. But if knowledge creation and accumulation is a universal process, in which people from a variety of backgrounds and different identities share common goals and concerns on the basis of the understanding as outlined earlier in this introduction, this does not require any excuses.

John Lonsdale summarises not only an academic, but at the same time a moral and political dilemma and challenge by posing the question how and through which media what type of message should be conveyed to serve Africa's interests under the circumstances of the early 21st century. His text is based on the plenary lecture to the first European Conference on African Studies organised by the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) in mid-2005 in London. This event attracted a remarkable number of scholars and was an encouraging sign for the efforts to bring about closer collaboration among institutions and individuals in Europe and Africa in matters relating to the African continent. While *Peter Probst* offers an historically oriented account on the mainly anthropologically influenced schools of thought and their developments within African Studies in (West) Germany, he also takes note of this new trend towards a less nationally confined debate among scholars in African Studies, which through AEGIS as a catalyst seems to gain increasingly momentum. Almost as a logical result of this new constellation, *Dieter Neubert* uses the panorama of inputs to the AEGIS Conference as a point of departure for his effort to (re-)formulate from a sociological perspective the paradigms, concepts and methodological challenges he considers of relevance for African Studies as a

meaningful contribution to a wider debate. In a fourth article not directly related to the special theme of this issue, *Peter Nunnenkamp* examines if more of the same development aid is good enough for African societies.

Patrick Chabal opens the debate section with his reflections on the role of African Studies as area studies and in comparative politics. He presents strong concrete evidence for the relevance of the expertise offered by area studies also for a wider theoretical context. *Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan* revisits a theme earlier on presented by Probst but turning it into a vehement appeal against culturalist distortions in the field of anthropological studies. He ends with the pledge for a calm and rational inventory of the legacy of the past. Such historical legacy is also reflected in the tasks of teaching history, an arena the two final contributions pay attention to. *Toyin Falola* confronts the national (not to be misunderstood as nationalist) African history-writing project with the need for its reconciliation with the local and continental narratives to secure the survival of African history in an ever-changing world. In conclusion of this section, *Julie Parle* and *Thembiisa Waetjen* present their experiences with teaching an African history course at a South African university. This is an exciting and sobering lesson, showing the manifold obstacles in transmitting knowledge in an environment not necessarily conducive to such intentions.

Somehow by way of concretisation this last article discloses in an exemplary way the ambiguities raised on a more general level earlier in this editorial, namely that African Studies seem to be open for a variety of (at times unexpected) misunderstandings, divergences in opinion and misinterpretations. This special issue will neither manage to eliminate such ambivalences, nor is this even its intention. The debate about African Studies will and ought to continue. But as long as such a debate exists, African Studies will survive.

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